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COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS  
CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SECURITY

DEMOCRATIC STEERING AND POLICY COMMITTEE

## Congress of the United States House of Representatives

January 25, 2022

Dr. Andrea Lemos, Ph.D.  
Chairperson and CEO  
U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board  
1750 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20006

Dear Chairperson Lemos,

I write to you today regarding a devastating fire which broke out on January 14 at an industrial complex in Passaic, New Jersey, hosting the Majestic Industries warehouse and the Qualco pool chemical plant.

The blaze was massive. The flames engulfed about 100,000 pounds of chlorine stored at the Qualco plant<sup>1</sup>, causing more than \$15 million in damage. The Qualco plant stored about two dozen chemicals at the site, according to a 2020 state regulator inventory list, including large quantities of chlorine, industrial disinfectants, and bleaching agents.<sup>2</sup> Firefighters from Passaic city and some 100 neighboring towns battled the fire over multiple days. These heroic firefighters ultimately prevented a potentially catastrophic chemical explosion had the fire managed to reach the main portion of the Qualco plant, which stored up to three million pounds of hazardous substances.

In the immediate aftermath of the fire, residents were advised to keep their windows shut but evacuation was not ultimately recommended. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) set up air monitors to measure for chlorine and other contaminants, and in consultation with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), determined that air monitoring results were within acceptable levels by state and federal standards, and did not pose a threat to public health within the city of Passaic.<sup>3 4</sup>

While we narrowly avoided a chemical catastrophe in Passaic, serious questions remain about the proximate cause of the fire and scope of the hazard posed by the substances stored at the Qualco plant. Over its history, the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) has completed more than 100 chemical investigations and issued 861 safety recommendations

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/passaic/passaic-city/2022/01/16/passaic-chemical-fire-nj-qualco-majestic-industries/6548160001/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www13.state.nj.us/DataMiner/Report/ReportRenderer?apiKey=DEP123&showheader=y&isExternal=y&boreportname=CRTK+Report&Enter+Facility+ID+\(FACID\):=75467100000&Enter%20Report%20Year:=2020](https://www13.state.nj.us/DataMiner/Report/ReportRenderer?apiKey=DEP123&showheader=y&isExternal=y&boreportname=CRTK+Report&Enter+Facility+ID+(FACID):=75467100000&Enter%20Report%20Year:=2020)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.epa.gov/aegl/chlorine-results-aegl-program>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2022/01/nj-state-emergency-response-panel-upgrades-after-qualco-passaic-factory-fire/>

which have undoubtedly improved public safety and saved lives.<sup>5</sup> Several of these investigations have related to hazardous chlorine releases, including the DPC Enterprises Festus Chlorine Release in 2002<sup>6</sup> and the DPC Enterprises Glendale Chlorine Release in 2003.<sup>7</sup>

In New Jersey, the importance of the CSB is well known. Following the tragic 1995 Napp Technologies chemical plant fire in Lodi<sup>8</sup>, a concerted campaign driven by the Governor of New Jersey, the congressional delegation, and residents led to the agency being funded for the first time.<sup>9</sup> In the years since, I have appreciated the CSB returning to our state on several occasions, including to our district to investigate the 1998 Morton International Runaway Chemical Incident in Paterson<sup>10</sup> and the 2012 US Ink Fire in East Rutherford<sup>11</sup>.

The CSB is uniquely suited to review the cause of the Passaic fire and the role that the oxidizing agent chlorine and other hazardous chemicals stored at the Qualco chemical plant played as potential accelerants. We must further understand the safety precautions taken by Qualco and the neighboring Majestic Industries to avoid the ever-present danger of fire at aging buildings. We must also determine what future recommendations regarding chemical storage, monitoring, and fire safety can be gleaned from this fire.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and for all you and the employees of the CSB do to make our country a safer place.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bill Pascrell Jr." in a cursive script.

Bill Pascrell, Jr.  
Member of Congress

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.csb.gov/investigations/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.csb.gov/dpc-enterprises-festus-chlorine-release/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.csb.gov/dpc-enterprises-glendale-chlorine-release/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/22/nyregion/chemical-plant-explosion-kills-4-in-new-jersey-town.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/environment/2017/03/23/trump-seeks-cut-safety-agency-roots-nj/99407398/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.csb.gov/morton-international-inc-runaway-chemical-reaction>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.csb.gov/us-ink-fire/>